

Essay Suspect sex

Alison Carlson

Lancet 2005; 366: 539–540

"The entire concept was appalling, an invasion of privacy. We had no problem with men. Maybe some of the women were born with abnormalities, but I had no problem, if they were born that way and lived as women in the rest of their lives. I hated what they did to them. It wasn't called for. It wasn't their fault. Drugs were and are the real problem. I couldn't understand what factors they thought they could use to determine womanhood for sports anyway. Just look at my birth certificate."

Track legend Wilma Rudolph, 1989

Precedent for gender verification in women's sports was set at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, when Polish journalists accused American gold medallist Helen Stephens of being a man. Officials felt compelled to do a sex check and issue confirmation that Stephens was indeed female. The 6-foot tall Stephens, said to have long male-like strides, had beaten Polish-American track legend Stella Walsh in the 100 m. Ironically, when Walsh was shot in the crossfire of a store robbery in 1980, the coroners report, leaked to the press, indicated ambiguous genitalia and abnormal sex chromosomes.

Other instances cited as justification for the International Olympic Committee's mandating of so-called femininity control in 1968 involved four world-class athletes who lived and competed as women, but who later through surgery became men—Czech runner Zdenka Koubkova, who held a world record in the 800 m in 1934; Lea Caurila and Claire Bressolles, French track medallists at the 1946 European Cup; and Austrian ski champion Erika Schinegger, who retired after a 1967 medical examination requested by World Cup authorities revealed irregularities. Schinegger underwent sex reassignment and then competed in men's skiing and cycling. Both Schinegger and Bressolles were reported to have married and fathered children. There was only one documented case of a man actually masquerading as a woman. In the mid-1950s, Hermann (also known as Dora) Ratjen from Germany announced that he had been persuaded by Nazi officials to pose as female in the 1930s. He qualified for the women's high jump finals at the Berlin Olympics—where he finished fourth—and then set a world record in 1938.

Not long after Ratjen's announcement, rumours circulated that men from one Eastern Bloc country were binding their genitals and passing themselves off as women in competition. As a consequence, the femininity of several dominant Eastern Bloc competitors in the 1950s and 1960s was questioned. Most notable because of their strength and appearance were the famous Press sisters, Tamara and Irina. The greatest Soviet track and field athletes of that era, they set 26 world records and won six Olympic gold medals between them. At the 1966 European Cup athletics

championships, however, when women were asked for the first time to undress in front of a panel of gynaecologists, neither the Press sisters nor four others whose sex was suspect showed up. Their absence was construed as confirmation that they were not really women. In reality, they were most likely one or another form of intersex assigned by doctors to the female gender (or simply assumed to be female) at birth, trying to do the best they could in life as women and athletes.

Thus in 1967, with close-up visual examination of the external genitalia added to screening protocol (and follow-up chromosome analysis done especially in this case), Polish sprinter Ewa Klobukowska unfortunately became the first woman banned from sports for failing the sex test. Though neither hypermuscular nor notably more successful than her peers, and even though she had passed the so-called nude parade a year earlier, officials told the 21-year-old she had been competing unwittingly as a man because she had male-like irregularities and, accounts suggest, XX/XXY mosaicism. Klobukowska was publicly disqualified, and recognition of her 100 m world record and Olympic medals was removed from the books. She became severely depressed and broke off all contact with the sports world.

Athletes had mixed reactions to the policy of blanket chromosome screening when it was introduced. Most reflexively supported the policy as an effort to prevent unfair competition, and as a preferable alternative to nude parades. Others, however, knew—or gleaned over time—that this policy, meant to prevent men and male-like advantage in women's events, was singling out and harming women born with (and often unaware of)



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biological sex differentiation differences that confer no unfair advantage. María Patiño (See Personal Account page S38), for example, understood the injustice intimately. After her diagnosis of complete androgen insensitivity and an XY chromosome complement was leaked to the press, Patiño's sports career as a hurdler seemed over; she was thrown off the national team and out of the athletes' residence. People pointed at her on the street, friends disappeared. She went into hiding, trying to cope with the knowledge that she would never have children. "If I hadn't been an athlete, my femininity would never have been questioned", she said. "What happened to me was like being raped. It must be the same sense of violation and shame. Only in my case, the whole world watched..." Rather than give up, though, she enlisted help from specialists in sports and medicine to build an appeal for reconsideration, and in 1988 became the first person to be requalified as a woman for sport. Patiño never recovered her form, but her case did galvanise serious, informed opposition to genetic screening of sportgirls and sportswomen.

If the results of individuals whose sex was difficult to ascertain had been proven to be unattainable by genetically typical women, the rationale behind sex chromosome screening might have had more merit. But the records of known and suspected athletes of uncertain sex have consistently been superseded by XX women who passed sex tests, and their results never approached those of male counterparts. Genetic screens were, simply, discriminatory, since women born with aberrant chromosomes have no unfair, male-like physical advantages that XX women who pass tests cannot have as a matter of other forms of biological variation.

A history of post-pubertal male-to-female transsexuals in sports (normally developed men surgically reassigned) has contributed to paranoia about unfair male-like physical advantage. In 1975, at age 41 years,

Richard Raskin (see Essay page S42) became Renee Richards and won a battle in US courts for the right to compete in women's professional tennis. Over 5 years, she won one small title and got to the finals of the US Open doubles. In 1987, 50-year-old Charlotte Wood, nee Charles Wolff, garnered wary public attention and open hostility when she competed in two amateur US Golf Association events.

Richards and Wood ignited unfounded concern that floodgates would open to other, possibly younger, transathletes. As one transathlete noted, though: "No one goes through years of hormone therapy, massive surgery and this permanent life change on a whim, just to compete." Furthermore, automatic assumptions about advantage are medically discounted: hormone therapy and removal of male organs result in considerable diminution of speed, muscle bulk, and strength. Taller-than-average height and some potential biomechanical advantages might remain, but doctors point out that transathletes who carry a male skeletal structure on a female-type musculature are more prone to injury.

These realities are probably why the current transathletes Mianne Bagger, an Australian professional golfer, and Michelle Dumaresq, Canadian professional downhill mountain biker, have received warmer receptions than Richards and Wood did. Aged 28 years when she underwent surgery, Bagger has been welcomed as a professional by Ladies Golf Australia, and now plays Ladies European Tour events. At 1.78 m, 68 kg, she drives the ball 219.5 m, and is petitioning the Ladies Professional Golf Association for acceptance. Dumaresq was 26 years old when she transitioned in 1996. She started competitive downhill racing 5 years later. Reviewing her case after rivals complained, the international mountain bike governing body affirmed her eligibility, and Dumaresq is now Canada's national champion.

Increased awareness over time of the ethical and functional inconsistencies of reducing women athletes to their sex chromosomes explains the decision by the International Olympic Committee in 1999 to eliminate blanket chromosome screens; and in 2004 to proactively establish a progressive policy to allow transgender competitors in Olympic games provided they are at least 2 years post surgery and on continued hormone therapy. Any attempt to separate the sexes for sport by use of black and white constructs of maleness/femaleness creates more problems than it solves. Chromosome screens imposed these cut and dried distinctions, which simply do not exist biologically.

That society has had a difficult time allowing for sex/gender identity difference is affirmed by the ending to Stella Walsh's story. Walsh was raised a girl, and was a much-loved athlete, wife, and coach. Nevertheless, after she was killed in 1980, there was uproar about her gender in the media, and Walsh is still referred to in some record books as a he/she.